

Playing with fire - juvenile firesetters

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Most children are fascinated with fire. They want to know how fire looks and feels, what it can do and how it will burn.

A 4-year-old boy set a stuffed animal ablaze as he played with a lighter on his bed. He then shut his bedroom door behind him and joined his family for dinner, leaving the room to burn.

Within 20 minutes, the smoke detector blared. The house filled with smoke. And the boy's bedroom was engulfed in flames, causing \$100,000 in damages.

Later, when a psychologist asked the boy why he didn't tell anyone about the fire, he replied, "I thought if I closed the door it would go away."

Children, including toddlers cause thousands of home fires each year by playing with matches, lighters or candles. The average age of a person dying in this type of fire is four years old. Most fires caused by children playing with lighters, matches or candles tend to begin in bedrooms. The most common items ignited are the mattresses and bedding. Sadly, many young children tend to hide under beds or in a closet during house fires - especially fires they've started.

Telling children "don't play with matches or lighters" is not enough.

If a child plays with matches or lighters, a parent should be concerned about the child's safety, and the safety of those who live with the child. All it takes is one match to spell disaster.

Things to remember:

- A home fire can double in size every 30 seconds and quickly become out of control.
- While curiosity is a part of normal development, fire setting is dangerous and should be addressed.
- Fire setting is not a phase and needs to be addressed before it gets worse.

While curiosity about fire is common, some children light fires for other reasons. This behavior can be a child's way of acting out fear or anxiety. For more information on juvenile firesetters, contact the Illinois Fire Safety Alliance at www.ifsa.org.